

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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One beanie does not a college make. You also have to have a football team—a winning one, preferably. The college of our story, being inordinately progressive, also has murder on its curriculum.



THAT YEAR'S VICTIM

by Jack Ritchie

WE WOULD like to murder you," Freddie Thompson said.

I hadn't expected the honor and I was flattered. However I went through the motions of resisting. "I really don't know whether I can spare the time."

"It won't take but a few moments of your time, Professor."

Professor Harding and I had been engaged in a game of chess when Freddie had knocked at the door of my rooms on faculty row. He represented the committee appointed to arrange the murder.

Harding lit his pipe. "What weapon do you intend using on Professor Ranier?"

"Most of us would have preferred to cut his throat," Freddie said. "But then we remembered that a knife was used to dispose of

Professor Elbert last year and we don't like to be repetitious. We finally decided that a revolver would do nicely."

"And just when am I going to be murdered, Freddie?" I asked.

Freddie wore heavy glasses and his penetrating eyes were almost as large as the lenses. "Some time in the near future, Professor. Perhaps tomorrow, perhaps the next day. We prefer the actual moment to come as a surprise to you. We feel that if you knew in advance, you might be tempted to—shall we say—ham it up?"

"I would do no such thing," I said stiffly.

"Nevertheless," Freddie said, and he smiled thinly, "we prefer that it come as a surprise."

Every year the senior law class at our university stages a mock murder and a mock trial. The murder is usually committed in the presence of as many startled and unsuspecting witnesses as possible—the principle of that being to show the law students, through the trial, that the testimony of eye witnesses is often more than unreliable.

Last year, for instance, Professor Elbert was "stabbed" as classes were changing in the Physical Education building.

The assailant—as usual, it seems—made his physical escape, but

was later "arrested" and brought to trial. The incident was witnessed by twenty-eight students and three faculty members. There were not exactly thirty-one different descriptions of the murderer, but suffice it to say that the defendant was found not guilty.

"Who has been selected to murder me?"

Freddie smiled again. "We haven't made a final decision. But there are any number of volunteers."

"Shall I carry a plastic bag of tomato juice and crush it to my chest when I am shot?"

"No. We've decided that that will not be necessary this year."

I thought I saw why. When Professor Elbert had expired in his tomato juice gore, the baton twirling team had been in the corridor on the way to the gymnasium. Seven of the girls had fainted. And so had Tanker Flanagan, our star fullback.

I smiled. "Then I will have to resort to sheer acting."

"We think that everything will come quite naturally," Freddie said. He looked at Harding. "No one but the committee and the victim must know. You will keep this a secret?"

"I won't breathe a word," Harding said.

When Freddie was gone, Harding and I returned to our game.

Harding pondered his king's side attack. "Freddie Thompson? He's one of the most brilliant students this university has ever had, isn't he?"

I nodded. "Almost a straight A student."

"Almost?"

"Yes. Through pre-law and law, he's received only one B."

"Really? Who gave it to him?"

"I did."

Harding moved his knight. "A pity to spoil his record." He tapped the ashes from his pipe. "They'll have to shoot you in the body, of course. Not the head."

"Why?"

"There are some types of blanks which expel a cardboard wad with considerable force. The chest would be the safest place to aim the gun."

"They will undoubtedly use a blank which does not expel a wad."

Harding was doubtful. "I don't think so. You see, they want that genuine expression of surprise on your face when the gun is fired. The impact of the wad should do it."

Somehow the idea of being impacted by a wad made me faintly uneasy. I moved my rook and immediately regretted it.

Harding took a pivotal pawn. "Who else is on the murder com-

mittee this year, do you know?"

I could remember only one other student at the moment. "Roy Wickens."

"Tall fellow? Had to put in an extra semester because he failed one of his courses?"

"He couldn't seem to grasp real estate law. I was forced to give him the grade I did."

"You're rather harsh with your marks, aren't you, Alfred?"

"I do not believe in coddling students. After all, this is a university, not a nursery school."

Harding won that game and the next. He almost never wins two in the same evening, but my mind seemed to wander at times.

At ten-thirty, we quit and I saw him to the door.

He adjusted his muffler. "You know, Alfred, I've heard it said that the safest place to commit murder is in Grand Central Station during the rush hour. I imagine a crowded college campus might be a good second choice."

After he left, I read for awhile and then went to bed.

... I was descending the steps of the library. It was a beautiful, crisp, sunny day. Down below me at least a hundred students were gathered in sundry small groups—the girls busy at their primary mo-

tive for attending a university, to get a husband.

And suddenly a wild-haired youth wearing glasses dashed up the steps toward me. There was a snarl on his lips and mania in his eyes. He pointed a tremendous revolver directly at my chest.

There was a blinding flash! . . .

I sat up in bed, waiting for the pounding of my heart to become inaudible. After a minute or two, I forced a smile. The sub-conscious has a perfidious imagination.

It was perhaps three before I dozed off again. This time I dreamed of a well-attended burial in which I was the principal attraction.

I returned hastily to the conscious and switched on the lights. It was only four in the morning, but the kind of sleep I was getting was not designed to rejuvenate tired tissues.

I put on my robe and went into the study. I sat down to read, but inevitably found myself at the stack of student papers I would have to grade and return by Friday.

James Branner's theme elicited a sigh. How had he survived college English, much less become an exalted senior in law school? He clearly deserved a C, and even

that was charity, in my opinion.

I went on to the next paper, but my thoughts remained with Branner. Wasn't he on the murder committee too?

Branner was a large boy, huge actually. And hadn't he once been placed on university probation, for an entire semester, for participating in one of those homecoming riots?

There was no telling what an unstable personality like that might do next. I crossed out the C and gave him a B.

I worked until seven-thirty and then went out to breakfast. I arrived at the law building twenty minutes before my first class and went to the faculty lounge.

Professor Lasson, reading a newspaper in a high-backed easy chair, was the only other person in the room.

I nodded, took a seat at the opposite end of the room, and lit my pipe.

Ever since I quashed his attempt to make one of his books a required text, Professor Lasson and I have nothing but cold nods for each other.

If he had succeeded in introducing that miserable volume into a university with the prestige that ours has, ninety percent of the law schools in the country would undoubtedly have followed suit.

The financial loss to him was, of course, considerable. As a consequence, the expression Lasson reserved for me was quite as hostile as that on the face of a druggist, when you purchase nothing but a four cent stamp.

But this time Lasson spoke. "How do you like being this year's murder victim?"

I frowned. "I was always under the impression that the identity of the victim was a secret to all but the murder committee."

The tips of his sharp teeth showed. "A secret to other people, perhaps, but not to me."

"Why not?"

"Because I am the custodian of the gun."

Perhaps it was the lighting of the room, but I had the impression that his eyes were slowly acquiring a malignant quality.

"Naturally, we cannot allow students to carry or possess weapons on the campus," Lasson said. "And so I have possession of the gun—until such a time as it is needed."

A thought touched my mind. Did it have to be a student? To commit the murder? I quickly corrected that. To commit the *mock* murder?

I remembered that in 1957, Professor Jacobson had been bashed on the head by Assistant-Professor

Mable Watkins while he was lecturing his class on marriage law. The severity of her blow had generally been attributed to nervousness, but I also remember that two weeks previously Jacobson had broken their six year engagement. He took sick leave for a week.

Lasson reached into his pocket and brought out a revolver.

I closed my eyes.

"This is the weapon," he said.

I opened my eyes again. And I thought, did they have to choose such a large gun?

"A Magnum .38," Lasson said. "One shot will ruin the engine block of a car."

Why should that be of interest to anyone?

He reached into his pocket again. "These are the blanks."

I was gratified to see that the cartridges had no noses.

His hand went into the opposite pocket. "And these are the real thing. Beauties, aren't they?"

That depended on one's taste. "The ones people use to ruin engine blocks?" I asked.

He nodded. "Naturally we wouldn't want to get them mixed up with the blanks."

I was the last one prepared to debate that. "If you aren't aware of it," I said stiffly, "you are pointing that revolver at me."

He chuckled. "It isn't loaded."

I perspired slightly. Suppose he actually wanted to . . .

But that was ridiculous. Just because his miserable book was rejected . . .

My wits returned. The basis of this whole thing—this murder—this *mock* murder—was that there had to be a great many witnesses.

As long as we were alone, I was perfectly safe.

Lasson put the revolver and the cartridges back into his pockets. All except one of the authentic ones. He studied it thoughtfully. "I wonder," he said, "if a bullet-proof vest could stop one of these."

I decided it was time for me to go to my first class.

As usual, Freddie Thompson occupied one of the front seats—ever alert and prepared for any question. Roy Wickens was near the windows. He came to the university daily, only for this one make-up class.

James Branner, his brow low enough to suggest the Neanderthal rather than the Cro-Magnon, doodled in his notebook with the stub of a pencil. He seemed to be brooding.

And Emmeline Grogan.

Why is it necessary for women students to feel that their education is a failure, unless they become infatuated with one of their instructors?

The course and degree of her adoration had followed the usual seating pattern. At the beginning of the semester, she had found the last row quite comfortable. But as the weeks passed, she had gradually worked her way nearer to me.

When she achieved the front row, I had been forced to tell her that I was much too old for her and besides I had made a death-bed vow to eternal celibacy.

The love of my youth, Lucinda, a fragile creature, sensitive and doomed by the fates, gradually wasted away with something resembling consumption, and left me alone to face the world—overcome by grief, but looking forward to joining her at some future date.

It is a tragic story—and wholly untrue—but it has protected me for many years. It is usually enough to send the eager ones away misty-eyed and pondering deliciously on the unutterable cruelty of life.

But I'm not sure how Emmeline took it.

She was still in the front row.

At the nine-twenty bell, I cut off my lecture and the students departed.

But not Emmeline.

She regarded me with what appeared to be over-powering sympathy. "There's no use brooding

about Lucinda, Professor. Life goes on."

I sighed. "Not for me. I merely exist."

Was there a tear in her eye?

"You really miss her, don't you?"

My smile betrayed the maturity of suffering. "More than I can say. But every hour brings me closer to her. My existence in this world is nothing. I court danger."

She touched my arm gently. "Perhaps you will see her soon. Sooner than you think."

She wiped the tear from her eye and left the room.

Now what had she meant by that? Perhaps you will see her soon. Sooner than you think.

A thought came to me.

She was also a member of the murder committee.

Did she know something?

I had no other class until ten-thirty, so I went to the library to do research on the paper I was writing for the Law Review.

At ten-twenty, I returned my reference volumes to the desk and left the building. I stood for a moment at the top of the steps.

It was a beautiful, crisp, sunny day. Down below me at least a hundred students were gathered in sundry small groups—the girls busy at their primary motive for attending . . .

I felt ill.

Freddie Thompson was pouring over a notebook, but he looked up. Was that thin smile a greeting?

The brooding James Branner was there—brooding—and so was stilt-like Roy Wickens of the make-up class. And Professor Lasson. Were his eyes narrowed in glorious anticipation of something?

And Emmeline Grogan, who for mercy's sake might—

I fled back into the library.

I mopped my brow and went to the window.

Yes, they were all waiting. I knew that as surely as I stood there cowering.

How could one man have so many enemies? Perhaps I had been a bit too caustic in my relations with others. Perhaps my courses had been a little too stiff. Perhaps the world needed bad lawyers as well as good ones. Perhaps I should long ago have buried that story about Lucinda. But what is a man to do? He must live; he must be himself. And when the time comes . . .

I straightened. A man must be a man. He must be honest with himself; he must hew to his path—to the very last moment.

I walked to the desk and spoke to Miss Hendricks, the librarian. "Do you have a sheet of paper and an envelope, please?"

She got them for me and I went to a table. I addressed the envelope to the president of the university.

I dated the blank sheet of paper and began writing.

Dear Sir:

On the desk in my study you will find a theme by one James Branner, a student. I have given him the grade of B. That is an error. It should be a C.

Yours inflexibly,

Alfred Ranier

It was my last testament, but one must not leave things undone.

I took the sealed envelope back to the desk. "Please put a stamp on this and mail it when you can." I felt impelled to add, "Miss Hendricks, you conduct one of the finest and quietest libraries in the country."

And then I walked to the large front doors.

I paused only a moment, straightened my shoulders, and stepped outside.

It was a beautiful, crisp, sunny day. Down below me . . .

But I had been through all that twice before.

I walked slowly down the steps, my head high.

He stepped quickly from a group of students. He raised the .38 Magnum which could devastate an automobile.

I stared at him.

Professor Harding!

But what had I ever done . . .

The muzzle of the gun flashed and I felt the blow at my chest. Everything went black.

I came to as they were carrying me into the library. I felt the distinct inclination to moan, but I suppressed it. I would die like a gentleman.

They put me tenderly on a couch.

"You can open your eyes now, Professor Ranier." It was the voice of Emmeline Grogan. "It's all over."

I opened my eyes.

"You were superb," Freddie Thompson said. "I've never seen anything more natural."

I looked down at my chest. There was no blood.

Freddie looked a little concerned. "Are you all right, Professor Ranier?"

I sat up slowly and unbuttoned my coat. There was no hole in the shirt either and my heart was beating. I could hear it. Unquestionably I was alive and functioning. I gave thanks that I'd made it.

"I knew we didn't make a mistake when we picked you," Freddie said. "You're our favorite professor."

My nose and forehead wrin-

kled, in puzzlement and wonder.

Freddie nodded. "Some of the other professors gave me A's simply because they didn't want to spoil my record. But you gave me a B when I deserved it. I admire your integrity and courage, sir. You taught me humility."

Naturally, we had to shake hands. Freddie expected it.

The brooding James Branner smiled. "You give me C's. Everybody else gives me C-minus."

The tall Roy Wickens had something to say, too. "I needed the extra six months here. I couldn't have passed the State Bar exams anyway."

Emmeline Grogan patted my shoulder. "Professor, have you ever investigated spiritualism? I mean the seance? I have an aunt who's positively psychic and tingling with empathy. She might be able to get you in touch with Lucinda. You're my favorite professor, too, and I don't like to see anybody suffer. Like dogs or people."

I was still feeling relief and gratitude for the turn of events, when

Professor Harding entered the library through the rear door. He beamed. "Everybody was so stunned that I hadn't the slightest difficulty in making my escape. Some of the students recognized me, of course, and so we'll have the trial. But I have the feeling that if I'd disguised myself just a little bit, I could have gotten away with an actual murder."

It was then that I noticed Professor Lasson. He leaned against a bookcase, his right hand in his suitcoat pocket—the one in which the genuine cartridges reposed.

His eyes glowed as he studied me and a faint reproachful smile played on his lips. I had a terribly strong feeling that what Harding had said had given him an idea.

And the room grew colder.

The murder could occur at any time, I realized suddenly. Any time at all.

But perhaps it too would take place on a beautiful, crisp, sunny day.

And down below me at least a hundred students would be gathered . . .

